

YOSEMITE MUSEUM  
Yosemite National Park  
9037 Village Drive  
Yosemite Village  
Mariposa  
California

HABS CA-2809  
CA-2809

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

YOSEMITE MUSEUM  
(Museum Building)

HABS No. CA-2809

**Location:** 9037 Village Drive, Yosemite Village, Yosemite National Park, California  
Located on the southeast corner of the bend of Village Drive, the building faces west onto Village Drive and south to the Administration Building.

USGS Yosemite Valley Quadrangle  
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 11.272076.4180872

**Present Owner/Occupant:** National Park Service

**Present Use:** Museum, library, rare artifact storage, and employee offices

**Significance:** The Yosemite Museum was the first building constructed as a museum in the National Park system. The Yosemite Museum Association, the first cooperating association for a national park, was formed to raise funds for the building. The partnership between NPS, the American Association of Museums and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation formed to construct this building went on to construct museums in Yellowstone and Grand Canyon. The first NPS field school for nature guides was based at the Yosemite Museum. The museum was one of the first Rustic style buildings designed by Herbert Maier, who went on to become a leading practitioner of an spokesman for the style.

**Historian:** Sueann Brown, 2007

**Project Information:** This project was sponsored by a generous grant from the Yosemite Fund. The project was headed by Park Historical Architect, Sueann Brown (Yosemite National Park). She conducted historical research and provided overall guidance and support. Documentation was undertaken by members of the branch of History, Architecture and Landscapes (HAL), David Humphrey, BranchChief. Participating architectural interns, Laura Burghardt and Ashley Gramlich, from the National Council of Preservation Education (NCPE), documented and drafted the museum during the summer of 2008. Technical support and final formatting was provide by Historical Architect, George Jaramillo.

## I. BRIEF GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In 1927, an article appeared in the Stockton Record describing the recently opened Yosemite Museum. The article was written by Park Naturalist Carl P. Russell. Russell knew the building well. He played a key role in the development of the museum, from helping to stake out the building location to helping develop and set up the displays. Excerpts from that article appear throughout this section in italics. The entire article is attached in Appendix C.

Russell's article leads the reader through the museum along the path of travel museum visitors were encouraged to take. The route encouraged visitors to view the exhibits sequentially and to alternate between indoor and outdoor space.

### A. Setting

*"The Yosemite Museum is an important part of the "New Yosemite Village," located near the foot of the warm north wall of the Yosemite gorge. From a point on the "rim" of that wall, just slightly west of the museum, Yosemite Fall plunges in its roaring descent to the Valley floor...The museum fronts upon the main thoroughfare extending east and west in Yosemite Valley. In front of it, but set-off to the west sufficiently to give unobstructed approach, is the stone-faced Administration building. The museum faces south; the Administration faces east.... Immediately in front of all of these buildings is a large, open plaza offering good parking space for the hordes of automobiles that visit us."*<sup>1</sup>

The Yosemite Museum is located at what has continued to be the heart of the Administrative Center of the Yosemite Village. The Administration Building remains just to the southwest of the Museum and the Post Office is located to the east. These three buildings, built between 1924 and 1925, were the primary structures in the original administrative core of the Village. The Village site at the base of the north wall of the Yosemite Valley was selected in part to be relatively obscured from view points on surrounding trails, while conversely taking advantage of views toward key attractions like Yosemite Falls and Half Dome. The exact site of the Museum was carefully selected, personally staked out by Thomas Vint of the NPS Landscape Design Office.

The area in front of the building is currently a pedestrian mall. Trees have been planted around the building, partly obscuring some of the views both to and from the building. A Visitors Center, constructed in 1967 as one of the later buildings in the Park Service's Mission 66 initiative, is now located to the east of the museum, between the museum and Post Office.

The area behind the building has always been an integral part of the museum. Outdoor displays in that area include a reconstructed Indian village and a native plant garden, both of which have existed in some form since the early days of the museum.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Russell, "The Yosemite Museum", *Stockton Record* May 1, 1927

## B. Exterior

*“The first floor of the museum is constructed of concrete faced with rock. In building, care was given to leaving undisturbed the lichens and moss growing upon these cobble stones and boulders. The second floor is of frame construction and the roof and walls are covered with shakes. Between the upper and lower floor is a concrete slab which assures the absolute fire-proof quality of the lower exhibit rooms. Above is a spacious attic. A nine foot cross-section of one of Yosemite’s sequoias mounted at the front entrance lends unique character to the interesting lines of the building.”*

The Museum Building is a two-story structure with an irregular rectangular plan and a side facing gable roof and a low horizontal profile. The overall footprint of the building is approximately 138 feet by 37 feet. The lower level features a stone veneer, while the upper level is clad with wood shakes currently painted brown. The roof is also clad with wood shakes and features wide overhangs supported by heavy rough sawn wood knee braces. The stone facing on the lower level consists of large random rubble stone with deeply raked mortar joints. The stone flares out at the base of the walls making the building appear to have grown out of the soil. The upper level cantilevers out from the stone lower level, with projecting logs providing visual support<sup>2</sup>.

Architect Herbert Maier described the intention of the horizontal emphasis in his design as helping the building blend in to the landscape, connecting it with the ground rather than visually competing with the cliffs. The use of different materials for the upper and lower levels enhances the horizontal emphasis of the design. The architect’s use of native granite and wood cladding and log detailing were also intentional means of subordinating the building to its environment. The irregular shape and placement of the stones and the hand splitting and cutting of the wood shakes were means of achieving what Maier called “the quality of nativeness”, a quality considered equal to, if not more important than, the actual use of native materials. The care used during construction to expose the weathered face of the stones enhanced the quality of nativeness.

The main entrance to the building is through double doors recessed in a stone archway toward the west end of the front facade. A cross section of a large sequoia was shown on the original building plans and is still displayed just to the right of the main entrance. Windows are primarily paired wood casements with divided lights, arranged asymmetrically on the upper level. There are no windows in the main central portion of the stone lower level.

There is a two-story wing at the west end of the building that is recessed from the front facade. This section is clad in shakes and stone matching the main portion, but on this section the second story is not cantilevered. There is a massive stone external chimney at the west end of the building that flares out at its base. At the east end, a single story wing continues the stone facade of the main portion of the building. The stone wall on this section of the building originally enclosed a courtyard used as an open air auditorium. This wing now has a nearly flat roof not visible from the front of the building.

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<sup>2</sup> The logs are decorative, encasing the concrete beams that provide the actual support

### C. Interior

*"The main entrance opens into a foyer in which are exhibited topographic and bas relief maps, and many park photographs. Here, too, is the attendant's desk and show case for display of sales publications produced by the Government. The main stairway to the upper floor is in this room, and a balcony, upon which are display cases containing insects, overlooks this room."*

The double entry doors lead still into a large entry foyer which provides access to the public spaces in the museum. Double glass doors located straight ahead of the entry doors lead to the outdoor exhibits at the rear of the building. The attendant's desk no longer exists. A small gift shop is located just to the left as you enter through the front doors. The stairway and balcony remain, although the balcony is no longer used for exhibits. The ceiling is painted board formed concrete, with concrete beams painted a darker contrasting color. Walls are painted plaster and the floor is carpeted.

*"To the left of the foyer is the library. This spacious room is naturally lighted by large windows which give splendid views of the south wall of the valley. A beautiful stone fireplace, in which has been built a historic picture of the Wawona Big Tree, occupies most of this wall opposite the entrance."*

*Double swinging doors open from the library into the Mather library. Here are more sequoia bookshelves upon which will rest reference volumes to which anyone interested may have access."*

The doorway leading to the former library is now covered on the lobby side by the shelving in the gift shop. The outer edges of the original doorframe are visible at the intersection of the gift shop wall. A single flush metal door just past the gift shop now leads into the former library space, which is now used for archival storage for the museum. The south wall has been furred out and covered with sheetrock, blocking the window openings. The fireplace remains and appears to be intact, obscured by storage cabinets placed on a platform over the hearth. The double doorway leading to the Mather room has been blocked. A single heavy steel door now connects these two former library rooms.

*"As the visitor enters the foyer, unless he is on library business bent, naturally turns to the right to enter the inviting doorway of the geology room... Visitors continue from the geology room to the natural history exhibits."*

The doorway that led to the geology room still exists, just to the right of the entry doors. The doorway now leads to a large rectangular exhibit space, currently used for Indian Cultural displays. A single door from this exhibit space leads to the gallery space that runs across the back of the building. This space, originally used for the History, Ethnology and Life Zone rooms, is currently used for rotating exhibits. The original exhibits and spaces are described in detail in the Stockton Record article in Appendix C. The exhibit rooms were originally arranged sequentially to tell the story of Yosemite from the origin of the Valley up to modern times.

An emergency exit door at the west end of the Indian Cultural Exhibit room leads to space currently used as a briefing room and storage for the Valley district rangers. This space is also accessible from an outside entrance. The space occupies the single story wing at the east end of the building and includes a briefing room and storage space. The inside of the exterior walls in this part of the building are exposed stone.

*"From the History room, a rear door exits visitors to a covered porch upon which is a wildflower exhibit stand and old stage coaches.... In the back yard is a typical Yosemite Indian dwelling built of cedar bark. Beside it is a granary for acorns, upon which Yosemite Indians subsisted largely."*

Most of the back porch has now been enclosed and contains offices for museum staff. The log posts of the original porch are still evident within this space and the former exterior stone wall is exposed. The backyard north of the building has continued to be used to exhibit reconstructed Indian dwellings. A number of structures have been added and now serve both educational purposes for visitors and ceremonial purposes for local tribes.

*"When visitors have been conducted to the back porch, it is possible for them to return to the foyer through a rear entrance. A neat sign at the foot of the broad stairway invites them to view the tree and flower exhibits on the floor above."*

The second floor no longer houses exhibit space. The spaces that were used for the tree and flower exhibits are now used as office space for wilderness and Valley district rangers. A large room at the east end of the building that was originally used for exhibits and lectures has been divided into smaller offices, but retains a raised platform at the south end where the stage was located. With the exception of sheetrocked walls added to divide the lecture and exhibit spaces, most walls on the second floor are plastered with wide wood base boards and window and door trim. Men's and women's rest rooms, the only ones in the building, are located on this level.

*"At the end of the building opposite the flower room is the club-room of the Yosemite Natural History Association. Here local organizations such as the Masons, American Legion, and Boy Scouts hold regular meetings."*

The room that was originally used as a Club Room now houses the Yosemite Research Library. The fireplace still exists but is hidden behind file cabinets placed on a platform built over the stone hearth. The space is quite cramped, with rolling stacks required to accommodate the library collections. The heavy wood roof truss and rafters remain exposed as shown in early photos.

An enclosed stairway in the center of the second floor leads to the attic. The attic is used only for storage purposes. There are two roughly finished rooms located at the west end. Most of the remaining space has a wood floor but is otherwise unfinished, with exposed heavy built-up wood trusses..

## II. HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

One of the most significant buildings in Yosemite is located at the heart of the Yosemite Village. Visitors pass through the building every day, but few realize the important role the building has played in the development of educational opportunities in National Parks and in the development of the National Park Service Rustic Style of architecture. The Yosemite Museum was built in 1924, designed by architect Herbert Maier in the newly emerging NPS Rustic Style. It was the first building constructed as a museum in the National Park system and served as the home of educational initiatives that served as models for parks nationwide.

Museum development at Yosemite began even before the creation of the National Park Service. As early as 1915 some exhibits, primarily mounted wildlife specimens prepared by Chief Ranger Forrest Townsley, were displayed at the Chief Ranger's office. In the fall of 1920, the old Jorgensen Studio building near Sentinel Bridge was made available as museum space. Ranger Ansel Hall was designated as the Information Ranger that year and he began working on creating more displays. By the summer of 1921 four rooms of exhibits were open in the temporary museum quarters, including a history room, ethnology room, natural history room and a terrarium. These exhibits were well received by visitors and inspired donations of both cash and objects for the museum collection.

In May of 1922, a collection of Indian baskets valued at between ten and fifteen thousand dollars was donated to the museum. This donation intensified Hall's desire for a new museum building, specifically a "fire proof" structure to protect the growing and valuable collections. At Hall's request, architect Herbert Maier prepared plans and a color perspective sketch of the proposed museum.

With the advantage of plans and sketches of the proposed museum to inspire donors, Hall began raising funds for the structure. The Yosemite Museum Association was formed to handle the funds in 1923. This association was the first nonprofit cooperating association for the National Park Service, serving as a model for the associations that now exist for parks nationwide. The association later became the Yosemite Natural History Association and is now the Yosemite Association.

While initial fund raising was going well, the amount raised was not adequate for the type of building Hall dreamed of. Realizing he needed additional support, Hall went to Chauncey Hamlin, the president of the American Association of Museums, with copy of Maier's plans and sketches for the museum building. Hall had known Hamlin since the two met while on a High Sierra hike in 1921. Hamlin brought a funding request to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation. The foundation approved a grant of \$75,000 in July of 1924, including \$50,000 for construction of the building with the remainder to be used for equipment, furnishings and personnel for the first three years.

## A. Building Design Development

When the funding was announced, Hall met with Dr. Hermon Bumpus of the American Association of Museums to begin planning actual construction of the museum. As the first step of the museum project, Bumpus directed Hall to immediately begin construction of a branch museum and lookout station at Glacier Point.

The AAM hired Herbert Maier in August to prepare the final plans and oversee construction of the new museum. Maier's first assignment was to prepare the plans for the Glacier Point Lookout. Within days, the Lookout was designed and plans were approved. Construction began immediately and was completed in just over a month.

The Glacier Point lookout was the first of what became a Park Service wide practice of establishing trailside museums. The site for the Glacier Point Lookout was selected for its educational value. Located at the top of a cliff on the south side of the Yosemite Valley, the shelter has a spectacular view of the valley and surrounding cliffs, making it an ideal location for park naturalists to provide visitors with information about park geology.

Meanwhile, the original design for the museum building was rejected by the NPS Landscape Design Office. Maier reworked the plans, with input from the design office and both Hall and Bumpus. The revised plans were approved in September. The approved plans were for a far more modest design than originally proposed. There were apparently a number of factors that lead to this change. The museum was to be constructed at the heart of the newly emerging village center, and part of NPS Director Stephen Mather's vision for the village was that the buildings were to have a unified architectural theme.

Myron Hunt, a prominent Los Angeles Architect, designed the Administration Building, which was under construction as the Museum and Post Office were being designed. Gilbert Stanley Underwood, architect of the Ahwahnee, designed the Post Office. Hunt's design clearly set the tone for the other Village buildings. Despite being designed by three different prominent architects, the three buildings are nearly identical in form and detailing.

Maier fully embraced the revised design concepts. The buildings at the heart of Yosemite Village were among the first to be designed in the National Park Service Rustic style of architecture, for which Maier went on to become a leading practitioner and spokesman. In a 1926 *Nature Notes* article describing the Museum building, Maier wrote of the importance of harmonizing the structure with its surroundings, both in terms of the natural environment and the built environment.

Maier pointed out that the museum "must take its place as an integral unit of the new village .... In willing deference to the park service, there is observed restriction to indigenous building material in all visible exterior parts; namely native rocks, logs and shakes."

Maier described the relationship between the building and its natural surroundings by saying "The elevation of the museum stresses the horizontal – that seemed the logic of the situation. ... To attempt altitudinal impressiveness here in a building would have meant entering into competition with the cliffs; and for such competition the architect has no stomach. "



The more restrained design for the building was also more in line with Stephen Mather's vision for museums in the parks. In a 1925 Directors Report, Mather wrote:

*It is not the policy of the service to establish elaborate museums in any of the national parks, or to have them considered "show" places. Rather they are to be regarded as places to stimulate the interest of visitors in the things of the great outdoors by the presentation of exhibits telling in a clear consecutive way the story of the park from its geological beginning through all branches of history .... The national parks themselves are the real museums of nature, and the park museum in each will simply serve as an index to the wonders that may be studied and enjoyed on the ground by the observant student of nature.*

The budget for the building was barely enough for the revised design and could not have covered the cost of Maier's more elaborate original concept. Maier pointed out that while the grant was given specifically for a "fireproof" building, "... the money would not go far enough for that and leave over enough of a museum worth fireproofing." Maier resolved this dilemma by constructing the entire first floor of concrete, creating a "fireproof" vault for the collections while building the second level office space with less expensive wood framing.

## **B. Construction**

On November 16, 1924 NPS Director Stephen Mather presided over a day of ceremonies for the new Yosemite Village Center. This included the dedication for the newly completed Administration Building, and laying cornerstones for the Museum and Post Office buildings.

Construction continued through the winter, despite inclement weather. On December 16<sup>th</sup> ten inches of snow fell in the valley and had to be shoveled off the recently constructed second floor of the structure. Other provisions for the weather had to be made as well, including covering the new concrete with hay to protect it from freezing and building makeshift temporary structures over portions of the work in progress.

The building was completed in April, 1925 one month ahead of schedule, but it would be another year before the museum displays were completed. The Museum was finally opened to the public on May 29, 1926. The new museum proved to be quite popular. The Superintendent's report for June indicated the museum was "besieged by hordes of visitors", estimated at approximately 2,000 per day.

The museum plan was designed to encourage visitors to view the exhibits chronologically, beginning with geological exhibits describing the formation of the valley and proceeding through time to the stage coaches that brought early visitors to the park. The Geology room occupied the first exhibit space to the right as visitors entered the foyer. From there, a U-shaped path of travel led visitors through to the Natural History exhibits, the Life Zone room, and the Indian Room, then out the back door to the stage coach and wildflower exhibits which were located on the covered rear porch. The back yard contained more displays related to Indians in Yosemite. Visitors could return to the foyer through the back door and proceed upstairs to additional exhibits, including insect displays on the landing and a Tree room, Flower room and lecture

room on the upper level. A library was located on the first floor, accessed through double doors on the west side of the lobby.

### **C. Yosemite Museum Model for Education and Architecture**

Ansel Hall went on to play a leading role in education in the parks nationwide. By the time the Museum building was built, Hall had been promoted to Chief Naturalist for the entire National Park Service, directing the development of educational programs throughout the system. While the Museum and its exhibits served as a model for other parks to follow, the building also served as an incubator for developing ideas about the role of parks in education.

The Yosemite Field School of Natural History, founded by Dr. Harold C. Bryant, embodied the principle of parks as a place for education and study. Dr. Bryant had been a nature guide in Yosemite since 1920 and helped to organize a field school for nature guides starting in 1925, with headquarters in the newly completed museum. It was the first such field school for the National Park Service and provided seven weeks of intensive study for nature guides, with twenty participants selected from the numerous applications received each year from around the country. Dr. Bryant left Yosemite in 1929 to direct research and interpretive work for the Park Service from the Washington D.C. office, applying concepts nationally that were developed at Yosemite.

The Yosemite Museum project inspired a successful and continuing partnership between the AAM, NPS and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller foundation. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the foundation awarded grants for museum work in Grand Canyon National Park, Palisades Interstate State Park in New York and four museum structures at Yellowstone National Park. All were designed by Herbert Maier and are regarded as some of the finest examples of the Rustic style.

In 1933, Herbert Maier was hired by the Park Service as a regional director for Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) work in state parks. In this capacity, Maier participated in the development of guidebooks intended to assist state park designers in using Rustic design principles. These books were widely distributed and influenced design of park structures nationwide during a time when hundreds of new parks were being developed with CCC labor.

### **D. Conclusion**

The Yosemite Museum is easy to take for granted. It is a modest structure and, as its architect intended, it blends in with both the natural and the built environments of the Yosemite Village. In addition to being intentionally unobtrusive, the Rustic style became so ubiquitous and synonymous with park architecture that the structure now seems very ordinary. What is extraordinary about its architecture is that it was one of the earliest structures designed in the National Park Service Rustic Style of architecture and, therefore, a prototype for the structures constructed later nationwide. Museum architect Herbert Maier became a key figure in the development of the style, both as a practitioner and spokesman.

In addition to being an architectural prototype for later park structures, the Yosemite Museum was a model for the development of educational opportunities throughout the National Park Service. It was the first collaboration between the National Park Service and the American Association of Museums and established an ongoing partnership that resulted in the construction of museums in other national parks. The museum building provided for other Yosemite educational initiatives that became models for the park service, including the first field school for nature guides in the park service, the Yosemite Field School of Natural History.

### III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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- b. 1955 Measured Drawings, DOI, WODC Office, 7/1955
- c. 1966 As-Built Construction Drawing, Spencer Lee and Busse Architects, 05/1966

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